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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace in the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in the critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: the role of men and boys in achieving gender equality

Statement submitted by Franciscans International, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status with the Economic and Social Council, and Sisters of Mercy, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

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Examination of the Beijing Platform for Action and the Millennium Development Goals demonstrates that gender inequality is seen as one of the major blocks to achieving a developed society. Similarly, the health crisis of the HIV/AIDS pandemic is acknowledged as another such barrier. In our view, these two obstacles have a close relationship and without the full participation of men and boys, no such substantial progress will be made in overcoming either gender inequality or the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Men and boys must be involved in all levels of this effort from governments and civil society to media and the private sector. However, governments do need to lead the way to protect their citizens from a virus that does not respect culture, religion, or tradition but does discriminate on the basis of gender. This statement stresses the role of men and boys in AIDS prevention and also their responsibility in reducing the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS and providing care for people living with HIV/AIDS.

Article 14 of the Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS states that "gender equality and the empowerment of women are fundamental elements in the reduction of the vulnerability of women and girls to HIV/AIDS."

Few international issues relate more directly to gender inequality than the AIDS epidemic. Not only are women 2 to 4 times more physiologically susceptible than men to infection during sexual intercourse, but women frequently do not have the power to negotiate safe sex or refuse unwanted sex. These factors, along with ignorance and youth, are primary reasons why among those aged 15-24 in Africa, women were found to be two and a half times as likely to be infected as their male counterparts.

Gender norms which encourage men and boys to engage in risky, early, or aggressive sexual behavior unfairly discriminate against women and require change. High levels of violence against women also indicate discriminatory norms and further contribute to higher risks of HIV infection for women. These gender norms, directly related to social and cultural patterns

of male dominance, can be changed by increasing awareness of gender discrepancies through educational programs, the creation of alternative rituals and customs, and urging men to take responsibility for their actions. Because of the many factors making women more vulnerable than men to infection, it is especially important to address the gender dimensions of the epidemic. The UNAIDS Progress Report on the Global Response to HIV/AIDS also notes this to be of particular concern. While the biological risk factors of HIV infection among women cannot be reduced, social risk factors can and should be.

The Beijing Platform for Action, in speaking of gender equality, explicitly states that it will only be accomplished if men and boys are actively involved and encouraged in all efforts (para 58). Men in positions of power are sometimes unwilling to be responsible and accountable for the obligations that come with that power. At times men refuse to be responsible for their sexual behavior and put women at risk for HIV infection with their seemingly "masculine" behavior. They are also thought to be immalleable in their conceptions of gender and masculinity. However, programs such as Engender Health's *Men as Partners Programme* in South Africa and Mongol Vision's *HIV/AIDS Project* with the military in Mongolia show that men can be open to changing their attitudes on gender and that men's behavior need not be either fixed or resistant to change.

Through these programs like these, men are made aware of the adverse consequences of their dominance over women and come to understand the relationship of gender inequality and HIV/AIDS. At the same time, men are being informed as to how their social behavior can make women and girls less vulnerable to HIV infection. More projects like these need to be funded and promoted. Men have successfully challenged traditional gender roles and understand they also have much to gain from gender equality.

In order to reduce gender inequality, one needs to determine where power imbalances occur between genders. Governments have already agreed to take steps to ensure that laws and cultural practices promote gender equality. Article 5 of the Convention on the Elimination of

All Forms of Discrimination against Women requires states to take appropriate measu modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices which a on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped men and women." Additionally, UNAIDS has urged countries to ensure that the Decl of Commitment on HIV/AIDS targets are reached by assessing and addressing the law policies, and practices that increase the vulnerability of women and girls. Article 47 o Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS states that governments must "challenge g stereotypes and attitudes, and gender inequalities in relation to HIV/AIDS, encouragir active involvement of men and boys."

Governments must change policies and laws that promote gender inequality if they se wish to stop the spread of HIV/AIDS. There is also a need for a comprehensive analy cultural norms that might increase the risk of HIV infection among women, and the formulation of an all-encompassing response on both individual and societal levels.

We believe that cultural norms must be redefined and policies created that promote re women and individual responsibility. As culture propagates socially acceptable norm policy further legitimizes those norms, a cultural and political transformation is neede wherever masculinity is equated with dominance and oppression. Other traditionally masculine norms such as aggression, sexual entitlement, lack of responsibility, and se recklessness need to be confronted, questioned and replaced. Numerous studies have these conceptions of masculinity and come up with suggestions for a more gender equ society. To create a world where gender equality is the norm, we see a need on the so level for

- Recognition that discrimination and stigma exist, preventing people from receivi testing, treatment, or sufficient knowledge of prevention;
- Openness to discussions regarding sexuality and gender equality;
- Alternative conceptions of masculinity:

- A true man cares for his family and takes responsibility for his actions,
- Strength and self-reliance are expressed within a marriage through respect and equality rather than through violence and domination,
- Fathers take responsibility for their children, in particular ensuring that their daughters receive education, health care and protection;

• New traditions and rituals for purification and the affirmation of social bonds. Families and societies should

- Replace rituals such as widow inheritance, female genital cutting, early sexuality, sexual initiation, and having sex with a virgin to cure HIV/AIDS with ones that achieve socially desirable goals without harming either party,
- Recognize that sexual practices that increase the likelihood of HIV transmission, such as dry sex, must be re-evaluated,
- Reclaim progressive traditional features, values, and practices that promote gender equality;

• A proper approach to the socialization and realities of men which include:

- Socialization at an early age by targeting boys with messages of gender equality,
- Accurate and reliable information on sexual and reproductive health. Men and boys can NOT simply be assumed to have learned proper risk-reducing techniques from their peers or already have full knowledge of the subject;

• Effective comprehensive policies and programs. This requires:

- Involving role models such as athletes, musicians, politicians, and community leaders in public conversations about gender and HIV/AIDS,
- Targeting entire communities with grass roots efforts, not just high risk groups, by involving workplaces, faith-based groups, community-based organizations, and the private sector so that men treat women with equality in all their various roles,
- Reaffirming a commitment to gender inclusive participatory approaches to development and research rather than the top down approach,
- Supporting economic development so that women are less vulnerable to trafficking and prostitution which are closely linked to the transmission of HIV/AIDS.

- Replacing language that stigmatizes people living with HIV/AIDS;
- Harmony between work and family responsibilities for men and women;
- Raising violence as an issue in sexual and reproductive health curriculum;
- Reducing physical violence and the threat of domestic violence.

Individually, men and boys need to

- Acknowledge that gender is a human issue, not a women's issue;
- Promote and practice safe and healthy behaviors;
- Practice open communication regarding sexuality and reproductive health to build eq and safe partnerships;
- Be role models for their families and society by advocating respect for women and practices that protect partners;
- Not preclude themselves from receiving proper HIV prevention information because traditionally masculine ideals of strength and self-reliance;
- Actively involve themselves in child-rearing and reproductive health decisions within their families;
- Be involved in HIV/AIDS programs that
  - Include prevention and capacity building programs,
  - Prevent HIV transmission in pregnant women, mothers, and children,
  - Support and care for people living with AIDS,
  - Reduce the stigma of those living with HIV/AIDS;
- Ensure that female family members receive an education equal to male family members;
- Promote an end to female stereotyping which depicts women as submissive, non-ratio and passive;
- Work to end violence against women by seriously responding to reports of rape and sexual abuse;
- Work towards peaceful solutions to conflict, as AIDS spreads quicker in areas of war political unrest.

While promoting the role of men and boys in HIV/AIDS prevention and care, it is important that programs do not reinforce power imbalances by giving men complete control over resources and decision-making, especially in the area of reproductive health. Involving men and boys in areas that have traditionally been within the control of women should not reduce the power of women but instead create a more equitable divide of social responsibilities.

With a strong commitment, men can promote gender equality and halt the spread of HIV/AIDS, properly care for people living with HIV/AIDS, and reduce the stigma associated with AIDS. Real change will only happen, however, when men change their attitudes and sexual behavior. This must occur with a reevaluation of cultural norms, followed by a concerted effort to socialize according to the new norms, since individual efforts are unlikely to make a sufficient impact due to the especially restrictive social norms that surround sexuality and gender roles.